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Barbara Viniar
Cornell University, bv28@cornell.edu

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Community Colleges Go Outside to Fill Key Posts

Abstract
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CC Leader

Community Colleges Go Outside to Fill Key Posts

BARBARA VINIAR

Ask one community college leader if hiring individuals who haven't come through the ranks makes sense, and he will say absolutely not, the cultural adjustment is too difficult. Ask another, and she will say that with the right guidance and orientation, "outsiders" make excellent hires. Ask another, and you'll hear that there is an adequate but underrepresented pool of potential leaders among women and minorities already in community colleges, why go outside?

Half of the nation's nearly 1,000 community college presidents will retire over the next few years, according to some estimates. In addition, the senior administrators who might have been on track to assume these positions are themselves retiring, drying up the pipeline that used to ensure a steady flow of candidates from within, and creating vacancies in critical areas of campus leadership. Filling "the leadership gap" has reached a crisis point for community colleges nationwide.

In the midst of this crisis, some campuses are turning to candidates from business, the military, politics and other non-community college backgrounds. While some community colleges are wary of "outsiders," there are numerous New England examples of leaders who have made the transition successfully.

Military officers receive leadership training and often retire young enough to have a full second career. David Bull retired from the U.S. Air Force as a colonel and is now dean of administration and finance at Quinebaug Community College in Connecticut. He says his responsibilities and challenges are so similar it was like "taking off one uniform and putting on another." As a base civil engineer, Bull was responsible for facilities, capital projects, procurement of maintenance and repair contracts and master planning. He now oversees the college store, facilities, finance, IT, personnel, maintenance and contracting. "The applications are different," says Bull, "but the fundamentals are the same." Bull sees his role as "the leader of a business enterprise that supports the academic community." The MBA he earned while in the military assists him in achieving efficiencies.

"Although the military is a more hierarchical organization, getting the job done in either environment is about team-building and uses the same leadership skills," says Bull. In addition to the rewards of "direct student contact," Bull says he enjoys the "variety and constant challenges" offered by his community college leadership position.

Community college leaders drawn from the corporate sector are most likely to transition within specific fields like Human Resources, Information Technology and Public Relations. For Richard Hockery, moving from educational software developer to community college IT administration was natural. As CIO of the New Hampshire Community Technical Colleges, Dockery likes "providing access for those without other opportunities." Dennis Moore, assistant to the president and director of public relations and publications at the Community College of Rhode Island, had an extensive PR background at the former Bank of Boston and Roger Williams Medical Center. "PR skills such as writing are easily transferable," says Moore, "enabling an individual to produce quickly in a new environment." Moore says his tenure as chief spokesperson for the bank, addressing layoffs, branch closures and declining profits, and explaining "wrong side" surgeries and disbarred doctors for the hospital, prepared him for "crisis communications" during a difficult year when faculty voted no confidence in CCRI's president, who eventually stepped down. What surprised Moore about community colleges was their complexity and the challenge of dealing with multiple constituencies internally and externally.

Community colleges have difficulty matching corporate salaries to attract skilled employees, but they often offer a more attractive work/life balance, benefits that may include tuition remission for families and an intellectually and culturally stimulating environment. They also offer prospective career-changers an important intangible: the chance to be part of improving students' lives by providing access to higher education and better jobs. David Sykes and Joanne Agnello-Veley, both of Middlesex Community College in Middletown, Conn., were attracted by these advantages.

Sykes's 21 years with the Hartford Insurance Group gave him experience in budget, operations and payroll. He then started his own consulting firm specializing in productivity improvement, HR training and 401(k) educational programs. The broad range of skills made him an excellent candidate for his current position, dean of administration and finance. Although the benefits and regular schedule were attractive after running his own business, "making a visible contribution" was the most important factor in making the switch. Sykes says the biggest adjustment has been to a union environment where it is difficult to reward or penalize individual performance. He has had to become "more of a counselor and coach" in order to motivate his employees. "This is the best job I have held—something new every day," says Sykes.

Agnello-Veley worked for the U.S. Department of Labor, as well as a privately owned utility and a *Fortune 50* company prior to moving to a community college. These diverse experiences gave her the ability "to understand multiple perspectives and to know what works and what doesn't." Her biggest challenge as director of human resources at Middlesex has been "to understand and untangle red tape."

"If an average employee can't understand a policy, it's not a good policy," says Agnello-Veley. She and her husband both left the private sector for state employment to enjoy a better quality of life. "We have rewarding careers in our fields and time with our children," she says.

Middlesex President Wilfredo Nieves says he "relies on Sykes's background and sense of balance," while Agnello-Veley's "openness to learning and sharing has facilitated dialogue and looking at things differently."

These individuals represent the more typical "outside" hires. They have entered at a mid-level or senior-level leadership position which can provide them with the community college experience they need to become presidents. It is rarer for someone to move directly into a presidency from other sectors, but there are some whose backgrounds have made the transition possible. Before becoming president of North Shore Community College in Danvers, Mass., Wayne Burton served two terms in the New Hampshire state Legislature, one in a minority leadership position. "My legislative service was far better preparation for being a president than my doctorate in higher education leadership," he says.

Burton: *Legislative background prepared him for community college presidency.*

Burton sees important parallels in the skills required in his political and college careers: "First, I had to build consensus among 400 legislators, only 140 of whom were from my party. This was excellent preparation for working with faculty. Second, having an insider's understanding of the legislative process is an advantage for a public community college leader. Third, running for office is like being a candidate for the [college] presidency. It's a grueling process of selling yourself to multiple constituents while keeping your soul intact. And finally, like a legislator, my job as president is to be visible and helpful."

Many presidential duties have come naturally for the former politician. Last April, for example, Burton went to Washington, D.C. to lobby for earmarks for the college, provisions in the reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Act and a new technical high school North Shore is trying to build in Danvers. But other responsibilities have required more adjustment. Burton says he was least prepared for managing up, or working with board members. Presidents who have come through the ranks may have a network of fellow presidents to call upon when problems arise with boards. For those appointed from outside, board tensions can add stress to an already lonely endeavor.

Eneguess: *Spent 16 years with business and industry group.*

Katharine Eneguess, president of the New Hampshire Community Technical College, Berlin/Laconia, agrees that an understanding of how the political environment influences public policy is a significant advantage for a community college president. Eneguess spent 16 years specializing in educational policy and community development with the New Hampshire Business and Industry Association, earning her the nickname in the Granite State of "the voice of education." She is in her current position, she says, "because of the direct connection between community colleges, educational attainment and the future of workforce and economic development."

The movement of outsiders into community colleges is not without controversy. Some see it as one more attempt to make colleges into businesses. Others fear that the "crisis" is being used as an excuse to hire "good old boys" from business and government networks. But there is a powerful argument for going outside: Our institutional challenges are getting more complex and our leadership jobs are getting harder. We can't afford to exclude talented individuals with different backgrounds from the pool of people we tap to fulfill our mission.

Barbara Viniar *is executive director of the Institute for Community College Development at Cornell University and former president of Berkshire Community College. Email: barbara.viniar@cornell.edu.*